



Whom Do We Say We Are?

David Maldonado, Jr.

The 2004 General Conference will again challenge The United Methodist Church in ways that will shape not only the next quadrennium but years into the future. Many legislative items will be considered, and I fear that broader concerns could be overlooked or lost in the multitude of legislative decisions. I suggest here three broad concerns that I believe will shape the life and work of the church as it seeks to be faithful. These issues might not come down to one particular decision or vote, but more likely will be the outcome of several decisions that will have a cumulative impact on the nature and direction of the church. These three issues are at the center of our self-understanding as The United Methodist Church, thus it is not surprising that they reflect tensions among United Methodists who begin with different definitions and expectations.

What does it mean to be Wesleyan in today's world? At the core of being the United Methodist Church is our sense of identity and our Wesleyan heritage. Most of us have a general idea of what it means to be United Methodist. Yet, defining, and especially coming to a commonly shared sense of, what that means is much more challenging. The church is in a complex internal struggle over theological and doctrinal positions. How General Conference decides on matters related to requirements of faith statements for faculty members in UMC institutions, professional staff in church agencies, and membership on boards of trustees will set the direction and tone on the role of doctrine and theology as indicators of United Methodist identity. Another such decision relates to the doctrinal and theological expectations placed upon the office of the bishop and other leaders. At the core of these issues is how the United Methodist Church views theology and doctrine, and how restrictive a role specific interpretations of theology and doctrine will play in the life and ministry of the church.

What does it mean to be a connectional church? A significant cluster of decisions will address the challenge of being a connectional church, including its global dimension. Support of church agencies, global relations, world service/apportionments, missions, and decisions about church structures will concretize our vision of the United Methodist Church as a connectional church. Efforts to weaken our program agencies and institutions that carry out the connectional ministry of the church could have a significant negative impact on the connection. Decisions related to the role of and commitment to Central Conferences and the emerging churches will be another sign of our understanding of the connectional church.

Certainly decisions related to the overall governance of the church will have a direct impact on the church as a connectional body. What will be our commitment to a connectional church that is globally present and working together as one body?

How will the church provide for clergy leadership?

The United Methodist Church faces a significant challenge in clarifying its understanding and support of ordained ministry. The recent challenge to recruit and ordain elders, the rise of local pastors, and the continuing efforts to clarify the role of deacons present multiple issues and concerns.

- How can the church produce, support, and keep more elders?
- How do we equip and incorporate local pastors throughout the body?
- What does the church really expect of deacons and what role will they play in the life of local congregations and annual conferences?

Decisions related to the orders of elders, deacons and local pastors will have an important impact on how the church will shape clergy leadership for the next generation. This includes the matter of mandatory retirement. The church needs to be more intentional in determining what it expects and desires in its clergy. A central issue is the type of educational preparation expected of all clergy. Ultimately related to these questions is the critical issue of support for theological education. For example, to what extent will the church continue its commitment to the Ministerial Education Fund through which the 13 United Methodist Seminaries are supported? The historic commitment to our seminaries is crucial for the future of a learned clergy including elders, deacons and local pastors. A significant set of decisions will directly affect the nature of the clergy. Related decisions such as global theological education, seminarian indebtedness, and support for the Course of Study Programs are also crucial.

In summary, this General Conference will be a critical point in clarifying United Methodist identity as it is expressed in the role of theology and doctrine, commitment to the connectional system, and clarification of the nature of clergy and support for United Methodist theological schools. □



David Maldonado, Jr. is President of the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado.